



By Officer Dan Toneck,  
San Diego Police Department

I still don't like what happened to me, don't have any respect for drunks, and find nothing neat or fascinating about wearing a prosthesis, but I don't mind educating people.

On Aug. 13, 1998, I was working the graveyard shift with the Traffic Accident Investigations Bureau. A full squad was working the city that night, but we had been hit hard with bad collisions, and, by midnight, I was the only clear traffic unit available. I was on my way to the beach when I heard a vehicle-versus-pedestrian call come over the radio. I was only two miles away, and, since this kind of crash seems to land in the hands of the traffic division, I headed to the scene.

When I arrived, I found that four patrol officers already were there. I had

# Why I Fear Cars

them block the street while I positioned my police car between the open roadway and the collision scene and turned on the lightbar for visibility. Traffic then started routing itself around the scene to the left.

A small, green Geo station wagon with two young women in it had hit a transient who was walking against a red light. Medics were present, and the transient appeared to have a minor skull fracture.

It took only 15 minutes to investigate this collision, during which time my sergeant arrived. Because my camera didn't work, I couldn't take photos of the accident scene,

as department policy requires in all collisions involving serious injury. I called for another traffic unit to clear and assist me.

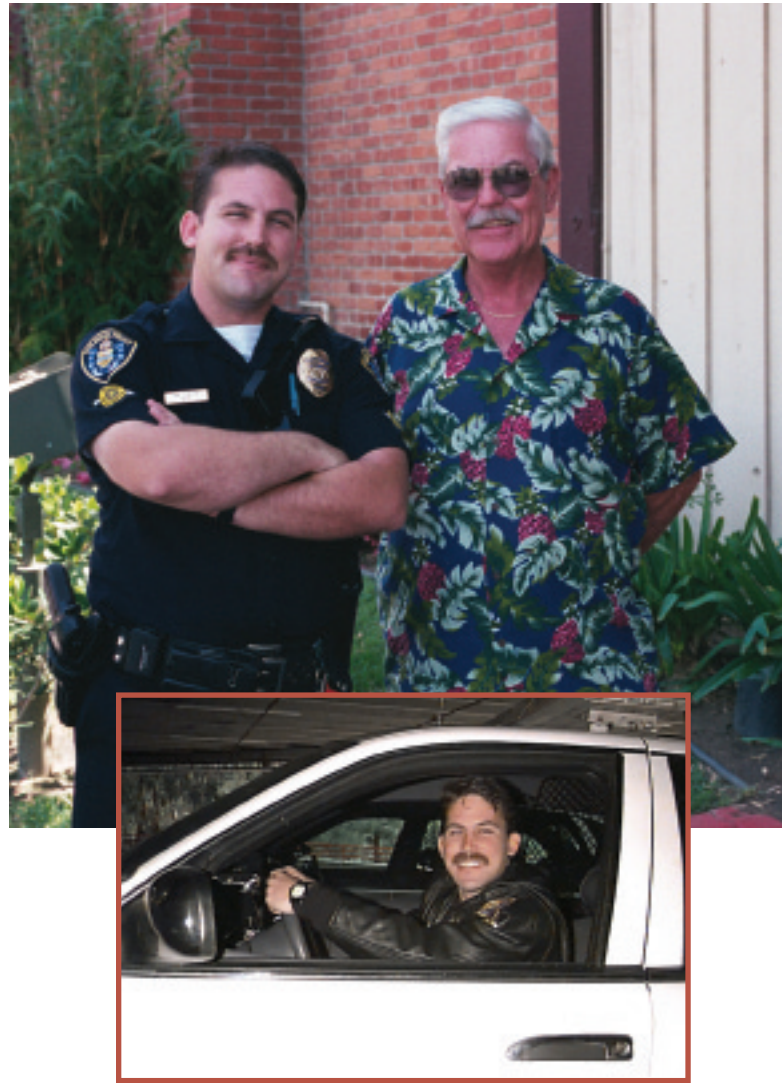
While waiting for that unit to arrive, I walked to the back of my car, which was parked facing the direction of traffic. I opened the trunk, threw my tape measure into a box of equipment, slammed the lid, and was standing there with my head down when I heard a short skid. I also heard my sergeant yell, "Dan, look out!" In the same instant, I saw a white hood and headlight slam into my left leg, pinning it to the rear bumper of my police car. I then felt my car lurch forward.

Officer Dan Toneck with his dad, who retired from the San Diego Police force with 33 years of service.

Afterward, I tried to hop a couple of times and keep my balance. I knew my leg was broken because my left foot was turned backward. It also didn't look like I had anything in my lower-left pant leg. I fell down on my back on the asphalt, between my police car and the vehicle that had hit me.

I felt white-hot pain in my left leg and tried to sit up to check the damage but couldn't because my vest and gun belt were in the way. Suddenly, my leg felt wet, and I saw blood running, like someone had opened a faucet. I was scared, and I could see my sergeant was, too. "I've got a compound fracture of my left tibia or fibula," I told him. "I need you to put pressure on my knee fast, or I'm going to bleed to death." Seeing some hesitation, I said, "Don't worry—just do it. I'm clean; I don't have any nasty diseases."

My sergeant, who is pretty heavy, got down on his knees and put all his weight on



# More Than Bullets

my leg, trying to stop the bleeding. By now, two other officers also had arrived and ran up to help. One held my head, while the other held my hand. They tried to keep me talking. Meanwhile, the blood kept running as we waited for firefighters and paramedics to arrive.

The pain was incredible. I could feel I was losing control of my body and told the officers, "I'm in bad shape. You guys had better get medics here fast. I need to be transported right now." In the background, I could hear cops yelling and swearing on the radio, trying to speed up the medics.

I remember glancing at my leg, then at the sergeant holding my knee, and seeing my

blood flowing into the gutter 30 feet away. I also glanced at the officer holding my hand, then at the stars in the sky, and thought I was going to die in the street. I passed out with them yelling my name. I had tried to keep it together but just couldn't stay awake. Everything faded to black, and, as I passed out, I was certain I had died.

Two minutes later, when my throat had relaxed and I had started vomiting, I woke up to find officers trying to turn me on my side. They still were trying to open my mouth (I had clinched my teeth from the pain) when I heard a fire rig pull up, and cops started yelling at them for taking so long to get there (the station

was just down the street). The same ambulance that had dropped off the transient made it back to the scene for me in 18 minutes.

Medics applied a tourniquet, then loaded me and sped off to a hospital. The officers in the area ran an escort, blocking side streets and the freeway to make sure another drunk driver didn't hit the ambulance. I was awake the entire time and could see how worried the medics were.

While I lay on the trauma table, the hospital staff packed my leg in ice. I've spent a lot of time in trauma rooms, and it was scary knowing what was going on around me. I heard the surgeon say, "What we have is a partial amputation. Lower-left extremity is white, with no feeling. I want the A-team bone doctor and vascular surgeon called on this one. Call them and get them en route, and prep the O.R."

With all the bright lights shining in my face, I had closed my eyes when I suddenly felt long hair hit my face, as well as some tears, and I realized my girlfriend was there. She's a medic and works the same ambulance that had transported me. She was off that night, but the medics had called her. She whispered, "Dan, I'm here. You have to pull through this and come back to me. I love you."

The next voice I heard belonged to my police chief, who said, "Dan, your parents are on their way. I'll meet them outside." My dad had retired five years earlier after 33 years as a San Diego Police officer, so the chief had known me since I was a baby. A few minutes later, I could hear my mom, dad and sister talking. I saw how scared they were. They said they would be there when I got out of surgery. When my dad leaned over as they were wheeling me to the operating room, I told him, "Try to get them to save my leg."

I awoke with a tube down my throat and couldn't talk. I could move my left hand but couldn't feel my left leg. My family was standing around me with my sergeant and a couple other policemen. I had to spell everything with a finger on my sister's hand. "Not dead," I wrote.

"No, you're not dead," she returned.

"Foot," I spelled, but my family started telling me not to move, to wait for the anesthetic to wear off, and to rest. I spelled "foot" again.

The room got very quiet, and everyone looked at my dad. He leaned over and started to cry. "They couldn't save it," he said.

I then spelled out on my sister's hand, "Not bitter."

I spent 17 days in the hospital, with the doctors trying to wrap skin around the end of my leg, but the skin kept dying. My fever spiked to 103 for the first week, and I had four major surgeries, which left me with a knee disarticulation, or "through the knee" amputation. When the doctors dismissed me from the hospital, I had to move home with my parents for three months because I couldn't feed myself or walk.

During the next two years, I had to undergo minor surgeries. I also spent a year learning to walk on my prosthesis. ■

*There's more to this story, starting with the day the young woman who hit Officer Toneck had to face him in court. For those details, read the sidebar that follows.—Ed.*

## The Sentencing:

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Seven months of jail time and six years of unsupervised probation—that's the sentence a judge gave the woman who hit me.

I'm not surprised, but it makes me sad that someone can plead guilty to felony drunk driving (BAC of .22 the day of the collision, with traces of LSD in her system) and cut off my leg, yet walk away with that kind of sentence. It was the first time she'd been caught drunk driving, but she admitted to being a repeat drunk driver in the past.

The 27-year-old waitress was on her day

off at the time of the collision. She also was finishing her high-school teaching degree at San Diego State University.

I think public opinion would have you believe that cops fear being shot on the job. However, most traffic officers like me worry more about being hit by cars with drunks behind the wheel. I've been hit a few times since my 1998 collision but never seriously. I still work full duty as a uniformed collision investigator in a one-officer marked car. My prosthesis slows me down, but I've been able to hold my own when people get out of line being arrested.

The primary factor in secondary collisions at our scenes is DUI drivers. Somehow they get past the traffic-control officers, and the next thing you know, they're racing unhindered down the street toward us while we're bent over marking on the ground with paint or chalk. The continuing problem of DUIs getting through our perimeter is why we now use patrol officers to shut down the roadway, then park our traffic-division patrol cars sideways, completely blocking the roadway closer to the scene. Our policy is "always



I know of two cases in which DUI Marines have killed highway-patrol officers. Here's what happens: They go to Tijuana, get loaded up, then drive back to Camp Pendleton, which is more than an hour's drive from the border. Once the adrenaline of making it through the border wears off, the Marines get sleepy, veer off the road, and crash into cops, who are making traffic stops or assisting disabled motorists.

I have to admit it's a sad experience listening to senior enlisted people cry nonstop in the back seat as you're taking them to jail for a DUI arrest. I've taken in more Navy chiefs than I can count in the 11 years I've been with the department. I'm fully aware they know the consequences of their actions and what a DUI arrest does to their careers. However, I've never arrested a chief who was borderline; the ones I've taken in always have been blasted. ■

*The remedy to the DUI problem for Sailors and Marines starts with common-sense risk management. Think about what you're doing, what could go wrong, and what actions you need to take to prevent it from going wrong **before** you do anything.—Ed.*

## A Big Joke

put metal between you and the open roadway.”

With San Diego being a big Navy town, Sailors and Marines comprise a fair share of our DUI problems. That's why the CO of the 32nd Street Naval Station had my department put on a DUI demonstration last year for the entire base [see “Every 15 Minutes—Think Before You Drink,” pages 28 through 30, *Summer 2001 Ashore*]. We faked a DUI collision with fatalities and filmed the arrest, processing and notifications of death to families, which we showed to the base in an assembly the next day. I spoke with the CO, who commented that he gets 24 DUIs a month across his desk.